



# Organisation of Trade Unions

All organisations have “mass”, but not all organisations are vanguards.

## Mass

“Mass organisations” are held together by common experience of a common predicament. They have a narrow focus and they are therefore not vanguard, in the true sense of the vanguard having a broad, concrete, comprehensive, or “helicopter” view. “Mass” organisations are, as a rule, defensive.

As a rule, the narrower the definition, the greater are the number of individuals who can be included in that definition. The category “men”, for example, can include all grown men. Whereas in the category of people who are generalists in politics, there may be very few. The broader the scope, the less will be the number of people who qualify. This is one reason why “mass” organisations are usually bigger than vanguard

organisations, but it is not always the case. There are small “mass” (common-interest) organisations, and there are “vanguards” that are relatively larger.

Trade unions are mass organisations of workers, who recognise in each other the common experience of selling themselves as commodity labour power in a market that is dominated by the bosses.

Trade unions began as trade associations (e.g. carpenters, or plumbers, or fitters, or wheelwrights), but modern trade unions are usually organised by industry (e.g. mineworkers, teachers).

### **Vanguard**

In politics, the word “vanguard” means the professional force, human framework or “cadre” which can lead the mass movement of the people on a revolutionary path. The vanguard Party is made up of professional revolutionaries. The relationship of the revolutionary vanguard to the mass organisations of the people is similar to the relationship of a professional to the professional’s clients, where the professional has the expertise, but the client is the master.

The revolutionary vanguard is a servant, and not a master. The vanguard party of the working class serves the working class, and does not boss it. Nor does it substitute itself for the working class.

The working-class vanguard party, which is a communist party,

is not separate from the mass movement. It is intimately involved with the mass movement at all times and at all levels. The vanguard party educates, organises and mobilises. As a vanguard, it must have expert knowledge about how mass movements in general, and especially about how the primary mass organisations of the working class which are the trade unions, work.

### **How trade unions work**

To deal with this crucial matter (i.e. how trade unions work) here, attached, and in the download linked below, is a text from the Marxists Internet Archive's Encyclopaedia of Marxism, written by Brian Basgen and Andy Blunden, two comrades who clearly have vast experience of what they are writing about.

This text is empirical and experiential, and there is nothing wrong with that, because experiential is exactly what trade unions and other mass organisations are. Trade unions arise out of the existing consciousness of workers as it is found under capitalism. In many ways, workers emulate capitalist forms of organisation. Their initial purpose is to get a relatively better money deal in exchange for their labour-power in the capitalist labour-market. Their initial purpose does not include challenging the order of society, let alone expropriating the expropriators.

Trade unions are in the first place reformist, and not revolutionary. Nor can trade unions become revolutionary without the assistance of professional revolutionaries,

organised separately as a communist party. Lenin dealt with this relationship in “What is to be Done?”, but in this item today we will stay with the practicalities. Suffice it to say, for now, that trade unionists who think that they can dispense with the assistance of a communist party - the ones known as “economists”, “workerists” or “syndicalists” - are on a road to ruin.

Basgen and Blunden in their section within this text called “How to build Union” put it this way: “Unions must be built on an immediate, common need of workers.” This section, from the bottom of page 6 to page 8 of the document, is an explicit set of suggestions on how to organise from scratch.

- The above is to introduce an original reading-text: [Worker Solidarity and Unions, MIA, 2003](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).